



## MAAFA

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

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#### **A MAAFA Prayer**

**God give me the strength to sing, pray and worship you even in captive moments. May I not hang my praise again in the trees of captivity but sing to those trees in praise of you. Amen.**

#### **I. Introduction**

Our lection text for today concerns the Children of Israel being exiled. Exile can come through a variety of ways. For some, exile is a choice; for others, exile is forced upon them. Either way, exile can be a place of new visions, where one's identity can be reclaimed anew, and where new dreams can begin. When one is removed from a comfort zone, the reaction can be silence or paralysis; it can also be a time of reawakening. The Children of Israel in 587 BC were taken into Babylonian exile, and their captors had little regard for their identity and none for their freedom. The Israelites, the "Chosen" ones, were uprooted from their places of comfort. Like Paul and Silas (Acts 16: 22 – 40), the Israelites were in chains, but unlike Paul and Silas, the Israelites were not able to pray and sing hymns to God. Instead of praying and singing hymns to God, the Israelites wept for a return home, they wept for Zion – longing to worship God on familiar and comfortable grounds.

The experience of the Israelites in exile is in many respects similar to the experiences of African Americans before, during and even after the civil rights movement. It is a loss and a gain of identity. How can one sing familiar hymns in a foreign land? How can one pray and worship in a foreign land? For African Americans and all those who have been in exile, it is a period of grief, anger, distress and pain. It is also a place of reflection. As did Jesus, who went into exile for 40 days and 40 nights, though enslaved, African Americans emerged with the capacity to become a seminal voice for freedom in the world because of a God who is not limited by geographical space or human actions.

Instead of praying and dancing to their creator, the Israelites hung their faith instruments on willow trees. In the midst of pain and torment, people tend to focus on the immediate circumstances. But God wants us to stand firm in our faith and steadfast in our worship of God. The songs we sing are not meant to entertain the enemy; rather they are pathways through which God can come closer to us (Psalm 137: 4).

## **II. What We Need to Remember**

Memories of events such as the *Maafa*, the Holocaust, World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War have lessened over time; but the wounds of these horrific occurrences linger in memories. As memories of the horrors visited upon black people linger, we must be quick to remember that our God is not a “once upon a time God,” rather God is always ready to hear our cries and our prayers, to walk with us and give us the power and the energy to break shackles of all forms throughout history. What preachers and teachers of the “Word” need to help people hear from God during the worst of times are prophetic messages and new hermeneutics that reveal God’s manifestations in seasons of captivity – captivity of death (HIV/AIDS, wars, hunger and poverty).

As messengers of God, we must seek to address a community larger than the African American faith community, namely, society as a whole. Biblical exegesis for most scholars has been limited only to the ecclesial community to which they belong. But our exegesis must begin to serve the entire human spectrum and must address every moment of dehumanization and injustice. Africans in Africa went through similar dehumanization during the colonial era under the British and experiences of concentration camps were moments when people were not free to worship God. Yet, Christian faith grew and people experienced miracles in the midst of war and suffering. Because of our suffering, the gifts that people of African descent bring to any ecclesial faith forum are the gifts of forgiveness, love, justice, peace and reconciliation. We who were denied have become the chief cornerstones of Christian virtues that continue to challenge and change the world. When God is acknowledged, he turns an enslaved person into a new instrument of love, peace and justice. Great leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are indeed products of pain and misery and yet they brought transformation to the world.

## **III. Songs that Speak to this Moment**

It is crucial for people to remember that songs are a source of comfort when sung in the context of grief and captivity. It is no wonder then that many Africans who were taken captive in both the United States of America and the Caribbean Islands became agents of God’s gospel and began to spread the word of God. Thus, exile can be a place where new songs and identities are birthed. A standard song of the suffering is “Stand by Me,” written by Charles Albert Tindley in 1905. “By the Rivers of Babylon” is a song that asks, in so many words, how does one stay connected to God in the midst of oppression? The final song that speaks to this moment is “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” This Negro Spiritual appears utterly sad at first glance, but even in sad moments, Negroes who were enslaved had enough fortitude to focus on heaven as their ultimate goal even as they were treated as persons without souls. Slave masters, many of whom were church folk, likely also had heaven as their ultimate goal. The Negroes also had something to say about this: “Everbody talkin’ bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.”

### **Stand By Me**

When the storms of life are raging,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When the storms of life are raging,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When the world is tossing me  
Like a ship upon the sea  
Thou Who rulest wind and water,  
Stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of tribulation,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
In the midst of tribulation,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When the hosts of hell assail,  
And my strength begins to fail,  
Thou Who never lost a battle,  
Stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of faults and failures,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
In the midst of faults and failures,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When I do the best I can,  
And my friends misunderstand,  
Thou Who knowest all about me,  
Stand by me (stand by me).

In the midst of persecution,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
In the midst of persecution,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When my foes in battle array  
Undertake to stop my way,  
Thou Who saved Paul and Silas,  
Stand by me (stand by me).

When I'm growing old and feeble,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When I'm growing old and feeble,  
Stand by me (stand by me);  
When my life becomes a burden,  
And I'm nearing chilly Jordan,  
O Thou "Lily of the Valley,"  
Stand by me (stand by me).<sup>1</sup>

### **By the Rivers of Babylon**

By the rivers of Babylon where he sat down  
And there he wept when he remembered Zion

Cos the wicked carried us away, captivity  
Required from us a song  
How can we sing King Alpha's song in a strange land

Cos the wicked carried us away, captivity  
Required from us a song  
How can we sing King Alpha's song in a strange land

Sing it out loud  
Sing the song of freedom, brothers  
Sing the song of freedom, sisters  
We gonna walk and shout it  
We gonna sing and shout it, yeah, yeah  
Shout the song of freedom, now, whoa, whoa, whoa

So, let the words of our mouth  
And the meditation of our heart  
Be acceptable in Thy sight, oh, verai

So, let the words of our mouth  
And the meditation of our heart  
Be acceptable in Thy sight, oh, verai

Sing it, sing it, sing it, yeah  
We got to sing it together  
Everyone aboard  
Now, now, now, now, whoa, whoa, whoa

By the rivers of Babylon where he sat down  
And there he wept when he remembered Zion

Cos the wicked carried us away, captivity  
Required from us a song  
How can we sing King Alpha's song in a strange land

Cos the wicked carried us away, captivity  
Required from us a song  
How can we sing King Alpha's song in a strange land

Sing it out loud  
Sing the song of freedom, brothers.<sup>2</sup>

**Swing Low, Sweet Chariot**

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
coming for to carry me home

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
coming for to carry me home

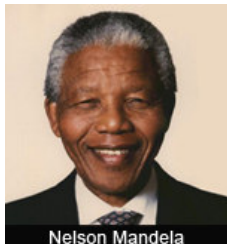
I looked over Jordan, and I what did I see  
coming for to carry me home?  
A band of angels coming after me  
coming for to carry me home

If you get there before I do  
Coming for to carry me home  
Tell all my friends I coming too  
coming for to carry me home

I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down  
Coming for to carry me home  
But still my soul feels heavenly bound  
coming for to carry me home.<sup>3</sup>

#### IV. Good Grief

The text for this *Maafa* can be transformative, because it helps is focus on the use of “**Good Grief,**” in that grief is not always negative but can be a source of new energy. Black Christians would do well to ask the question: How have we used our grief? Grief can drive us away from God and the devil can use grief to put us on spiritual life support; yet, as our text suggests, our Jerusalem and the Temple are still with us in our dark moments. The Israelites felt that foreign places were not safe for their faith and convictions to be lived out; but even the wilderness can be a great place of faith and spirituality (see Luke 4: 1–12). Jesus went into a wilderness exile and he never lost his identity; rather his identity was strengthened and confirmed.



Nelson Mandela

We can go through life’s crucibles and come out as instruments of peace and justice in the world. In the 20th century the world witnessed one of the greatest secular saints come out of prison to become the first democratically elected president of South Africa.

His name is Nelson Mandela. After his release after twenty-seven years of wrongful imprisonment, Mr. Mandela helped the country in which he had suffered so brutally to become a multi-racial democracy. In 1993, he received the Nobel Peace Prize. He became the president of South Africa in 1994 and remained as president until 1999. Apartheid exiled him but it could not kill his spirit, his ideals, and his understanding of who he was. In fact, his exile made him a stronger advocate for justice and compassion.



Nelson Mandela's  
Prison Cell

#### V. Making This a Memorable Learning Moment

Great images to use to discuss the *Maafa* and other brutality suffered by blacks include:

- The video titled Mandela Son of Africa: Father of a Nation
- Mandela an Audio History produced by National Public Radio, Online location: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1851882> accessed 19 October 2009
- Images of lynchings can be found in the book Without Sanctuary<sup>4</sup>; it could prove powerful to display such images along with the texts of Psalm 137 and 2 Kings 25: 8–12.
- A modern version of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” arranged by John Stoddard with images collected and compiled by Michelle Riley Jones serves as the opening image for this year’s Maafa lectionary material. These are wonderful images for a Maafa service.
- A trailer about a video on the *Maafa* titled Maafa 21 is included here and downloadable for use during *Maafa* services  
YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLnNi\\_qb7nY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLnNi_qb7nY)

#### Books:

Anderson, S. E., and Vanessa Holley. The Black Holocaust: For Beginners. New York, NY: Writers and Readers Pub, 1995.

Ani, Marimba. Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1992.

van Sertima, Ivan, Ed. The Journal of African Civilization. Online location: <http://www.journalofafricancivilizations.com/> accessed 19 October 2009

Rodney, Walter. How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. Washington, DC: Howard University Press. 1974.

Rogers, J. A., and John Henrik Clarke. World's Great Men of Color. Vols. I and II. New York, NY : Touchstone, 1996.

The Negro Impact on Western Civilization. New York, NY: Philosophical Library. 1970.

Quarles, Benjamin, and V. P. Franklin. The Negro in the Making of America. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

#### Notes

1. “Stand by Me.” By Charles Albert Tindley
2. “By the Rivers of Babylon.” This version of the song was written by Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton.
3. “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Negro Spiritual. Online location: [www.negrospirituall.com](http://www.negrospirituall.com) accessed 19 October 2009

4. Allen, James. Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. Santa Fe, N.M.: Twin Palms, 2000.